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Living in a Media-Saturated Culture & How It Affects Pre-Adolescent Girls

by Alexa Greer

(English 103)

The Assignment: Students wrote either an informative, objective report or an argumentative position paper on a research question of their choice to their major or program of study by drawing from no less than ten sources.

I am a twenty-year-old college student strolling toward the food court of the nearby mall. I can see a group of girls in the distance. By their appearance, I am assuming they are contemporaries of mine, but as I get closer, I am shocked to see that they are about the same age of my twelve-year-old sister. They are wearing make-up, one-inch heels, short skirts and midriff-showing tanks. Why are *they* dressed this way? The answer lies in the fact that :the marketing industry is forcing (teens) to grow up quickly” (Special Issues...). We currently live in a media-obsessed society where celebrities are our gods, and instead of being out living our own lives, we seem to be preoccupied by reality shows. Somewhere along the line we have allowed advertising and the media to dictate a lifestyle. The marketing industry feeds off this “ media-saturated culture” and provides us with products and ideas that we pick up from what we see and hear in the media. The problem is that the new “hot” market out there is adolescent teenagers or “tweens” (children between the ages of 8 and 12) (special issues...). This is an important issue because the products being sold to this age range are often too advanced or mature for adolescents. One of the major concerns is the popular fashion being seen on developing young girls. Even though language and body language is being copied, clothes are the number one example of how young girls are trying to mirror what they see in the media. Today’s world can be looked at as a “girl poisoning culture” (Pipher, 1994, p.12). Marketing provocative fashion to young girls not only provides them with negative messages about beauty, popularity and sexuality, it robs them of a key developmental stage where the focus should be on bettering themselves and building their self-esteem.

In order to understand why this is a new and heavily discussed issue, we need to understand what has changed either in our lives, the media-life or even in the fashion world. Fashion has always been around, and everyone, no matter what age, has been affected by it. One of the major differences between a generation ago and today is the pace at which we are living our lives. With the help of technology, we no longer have to leave our house to live our life. We can do all our shopping, including groceries, on the Internet and then have it shipped to us. We can interact with other humans on the telephone, with instant messaging or cell phones. And to an extent, we do not even have to be among humans to see how life can be lived. Now, we can even “live” within the reality television shows. It is no surprise that our culture has turned into one that is infatuated with the media. The unfortunate truth is that many people try to live their lives how they view it in the perfect world of the media. One of the major victims of this, are young girls.

### Defining the new market

“The entertainment companies...look at the teen market as part of this massive empire they’re colonizing” (The Merchants of Cool, 2000). Today’s teenagers are the largest generation of teens ever. They are becoming more independent and self-sufficient. They have more freedom, partly due to the fact that more parents are working rather than staying at home. Teens have access to credit cards and have more money than they have in the past. They have the “...spending power of over \$108 billion per year and the power to influence parental spending” (Giroux, 2000, p. 95). Not only is there more freedom and money floating around, there is also more intelligence. The amount of education is higher than ever before and consumers are becoming wiser when it comes to market strategies. “We are moving from a

world of consumer choice to consumer control” (Hines & Bruce, 2001, p. 85). Teen consumers have learned that if they want a product, they will get it. And they will go all out to achieve the look, or that attitude, or statement that they are trying to convey.

### Susceptibility

“Marketers are discovering there’s lots of money to be made by treating (pre-adolescent girls) like teenagers” (Merchants of Cool, 2001) or perhaps even young women. Targeting girls at this age is perfect timing for a marketing business. “It is...during early adolescence that girls become acutely aware of how they appear to others” (Lecroy & Daley, 2001, 5). They are searching for an identity; trying to figure out where they belong, what they are supposed to be doing, and *how* they are supposed to be doing it. They want to be unique and independent as well as seen as independent, but at the same time they search for “hints” for what is normal. “By treating pre-adolescents as independent, mature consumers, marketers have been very successful in removing the gatekeepers (parents) from the picture...” (Special Issues...). With the help of the fast-paced improvements of technology, marketers are able to be creative with how they want to sell their product. According to the video Merchants of Cool (2001), “a typical American teenager will process three thousand discreet advertisements in a single day... ten million by the time they’re eighteen.” If marketers are trying to relay a message to their consumer, it is pretty likely that their target will get it. Unfortunately, mixed and wrong messages are being sent.

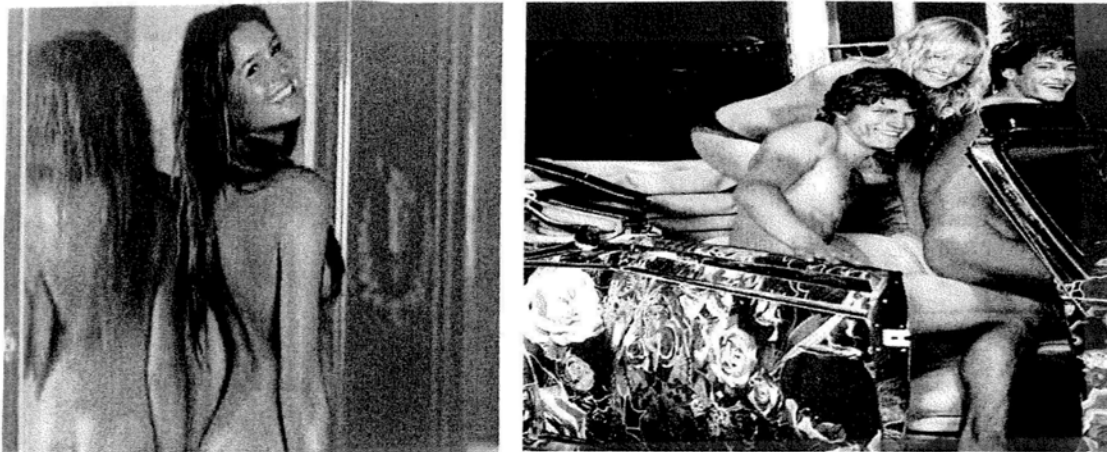
### Marketing Strategies

“Sniffing out what drives and repels teens is becoming a popular business” (Sanford, 2001). “Today’s young people are generally unresponsive to traditional brand marketing messages. What they do respond to is something “cool”” (Frontline). Because of this, Dee Dee Gordon and Sharon Lee found “Look Look,” a research company specializing in youth culture. Many large and small companies, such as apparel manufactures, movie studios and health and beauty companies, hire these women to be the “eyes and ears” of youth culture. These two women work by hiring correspondents who collect surveys filled out by kids, as well as take pictures and videotapes. Gordon and Lee then go through all the information and look for trends and themes (Frontline). This is just one example of how marketers are trying to tap into their teen market. But it seems as though it does not take a “Youth culture specialist” to figure out what teen girls are into these days. Any person can see the paraphernalia that girls are into. It is Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Abercrombie that is driving them. As soon as pop star Britney Spears aired her first single “Hit me baby one more time,” wearing her naughty schoolgirl uniform, she was a huge success. Quickly afterwards, it was not hard to notice that the “Britney Spears look” (short skirt, tummy-bearing shirts) was very popular. Surprisingly, it was not just the Britney-age females that were wearing these styles, it was the age of many of Britney Spears fans: five to twelve-year-old girls. But it is not just Britney’s provocative clothing that influences young girls. Britney became an ultimate role model.



They not only wanted to dress like her, they wanted to talk like her and wear make-up like her. If you were to listen to some of her lyrics, you would notice that perhaps Britney's lyrics are not ones to follow. With phrases like: "Oh baby, don't you wanna dance up on me...Leaving behind my name and age" or "you're a sexy guy, I'm a nice girl let's turn this dance floor into our own little nasty world" (lyrics.com), in Britney's music, it does not take a genius to realize that maybe a five to twelve-year-old should not be listening to her music. But Britney Spears is just one large example on how media role models influence the tween market. Hit music stars Christina Aguilera, Shakira and Beyonce are all examples of tween role models. In today's society, young adolescent girls look to the media for ideas, trends and even advice for how to fit into the mold of the public.

But it is not only the celebrities that they look to. Take Abercrombie and Fitch, for example. This store is popular because of its' loud music, "cute" employees and trendy clothes but most of all it is notorious for their advertisements. Shown below are photographs taken directly from the website: [www.abecromie.com](http://www.abecromie.com). Is Abercrombie advertising their clothing or pornography? Clearly, Abercrombie & Fitch are not trying to sell their clothing; otherwise the young girl to the left and the three to the right would be wearing clothes! What exact message are marketers *trying* to give our adolescents? Because obviously, they are working to sell more than just clothes!



Photographs taken directly from the Abercrombie & Fitch store website

### Negative Messages Sent from the media: Negative Effects

From the examples of Britney Spears and Abercrombie & Fitch, it is clear that whatever marketing strategy marketers are using, it can damage pre-adolescents girls in more ways than one. Marketers are strongly influencing young girls negatively by sending misconceptions about sex and sexuality, popularity and beauty, which results in lowering self-esteem, and harming body image. A pre-adolescent girl does not have to be exposed to many advertisements, commercials, music videos or just a wide range of media in order to be negatively affected. This one Calvin Klein advertisement (for example) shown to the right sends many mixed and unhealthy messages. Where should one even begin? This is an advertisement for children's clothing. Parents would most likely be astonished to see the way these two kids are holding each other. One negative message that this might be sending would be one about sexuality, or even that one at this age should be sexual. From this ad, apparently holding your boyfriend (since you are *supposed* to have one) naked is "cool" or popular. This photograph sends messages that it is okay to be sexually active when you are twelve years old. It says, "flaunt your sexuality, even if you don't understand it" (Special Issues...). The girl in this photograph is very young, yet still she is wearing black eyeliner, a black bra, while being all



Calvin Klein photo received from Special Issues...

greased up, giving a seductive look to the camera. This brings up another unhealthy message: Are young girls today the new sex symbols? According to this photograph, the photos from the Abercrombie & Fitch website and images of Britney Spears, they are. Why are marketers using little girls to promote pornography, or ideas about sex and provocative wear?

All of these ads also show that in order to be attractive, you need to be thin. Very rarely do you find a female in the media that is less than perfect. It is unfortunate that young children are pressured about their body weight. In a book written by Craig Lecroy and Janice Daley, *Empowering Adolescent Girls*, they state that a series of studies found negative effects on self-perception when (adolescent girls) were exposed to ads or photography with highly attractive females (p. 15). Another "...body-image study found that half of all Americans dislike their overall appearance compared to 36% in the 1980s...a large majority (78%) of teenage (girls) are dissatisfied with their weight" (p. 21). With the constant viewing of the media, girls are reminded of their "imperfections" of their whole being. They are not skinny enough, tall enough, short enough, blond enough, tan enough or cute enough to be accepted. This idea is plainly stated in *Empowering Adolescent Girls*:

Relentless media messages about the importance of "being attractive" and "having a perfect body" exert a powerful influence on young girls, who learn to equate attractiveness with popularity and success. During early adolescence, girls tend to look for guidelines that can shape their transformation to young women. This search for standards may be, in part, why girls are so vulnerable to the overwhelming cultural preference for thinness. For growing girls, weight control is the clearest avenue to the ultimate but illusory path toward "successful thinness" (p. 23).

Girls' minds are being polluted with trash and misconceptions about how they should look or act. The pressure to be popular and beautiful is pushing girls to the extremes. Not only are they upset with themselves for not living up to the media's expectations, they are developing eating disorders or becoming depressed.

## Solutions

Especially during a time when life seems so confusing to adolescents, they should be focusing on ways, which could raise their self-esteem, instead of lowering it. Why cannot we somehow promote and sell ideas about individuality, self-esteem, empowerment and what truly is beautiful? Do marketers have to sell sex and pornographic ideas to young girls? It may seem unrealistic to solve such a problem, but there are solutions. It is impossible to *completely* eliminate the negative media that surrounds us. If it were, somebody probably would have done that by now. Instead, there are other realistic solutions. The book, *Empowering Adolescents*, introduces a non-profit organization called *Go Grrrls*, which is "built around tasks that are considered critical for the healthy psychosocial development of early-adolescent girls in contemporary society," (Lecroy & Daley, p. 4). This program works to:

1. Achieve a competent gender-role identification
2. Establish an acceptable body image
3. Develop a positive self-image
4. Develop satisfactory peer relationships
5. Establish independence through responsible decision-making
6. Understand sexuality
7. Learn to obtain help and find access to resources
8. Plan for the future (Lecroy & Daley, 2001, p. 4-5)

Although there are programs tweens could join or look into, they do not have to in order to feel comfortable with themselves amongst the venomous media. Most of the responsibility to resolve this problem should go to the parents and guardians. Parenting is a key factor that should take place. More women have entered the work force and there are more double-income families than there were ten years

ago. At the same time, it is important that parents or guardians are staying as involved as they can in their child's life. Some ways to promote healthier beings are:

- Introduce your kids to sports. Not only will they help build stronger and healthier bodies, they will also help lead to an improvement in self-esteem and body image.
- For those who are not athletically inclined, improve self-expression through involvement in the arts.
- Talk to your kids. Instead of having to look to the media for "advice," show them that you are there for them and are willing to provide whatever helps them. Let them know you care.
- Explain how advertising works. Talk about how the job of marketers is to play on human insecurities by creating ads that imply their products will improve our lives and bring us happiness. Have kids make a list of the good things in their lives (the things they value) and then make a list of the things they wish they could buy. Have them compare the "real life" list with the "wish" list. Do they think the things on the wish list will bring them happiness? (Special Issues...)

Often, kids are "sucked" into the television, magazines and Internet because of boredom. They do not have anything else to do. Help keep your children involved and busy. Encourage them to participate in activities using the imagination. Also, limit the amount of television, magazines and Internet use. Although all can be entertaining, they all can also be poisoning. A lot of what is shown in the media is not real.

The truth is that *we are* living in a fast-paced world and nothing is going to stop that. Technology is going to become greater which in turn creates more opportunities for the media. It is important that today's culture is raising independent, strong and healthy young girls...especially when they are currently the number one targeted market for the media. Perhaps it is the duty for any adult, whether: a parent, guardian, older sibling, relative or teacher to be cognizant of the pressures that are put on our tweens in today's media, and strive to be good role models for our future generation.

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